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Democratic Response to Yonkers State of the City Address

Good evening. I am Yonkers City Council President Chuck Lesnick with the Democratic response to the State of the City.

We have just heard Mayor Amicone give yet another explanation of how the bad economy will adversely affect our upcoming budget. While this is true, the City needs to take responsibility for its finances.

The Democratic majority of the City Council recognizes the need for shared sacrifices. We will demand that every expense is justified and that sufficient oversight is in place before asking the taxpayers of Yonkers for more money. Tax revenue is a precious resource that we cannot waste. When we collect revenue, the City must spend it wisely.

When you want to know the priorities of a society, look at its budget. This City Council will demand on a budget that places the people and taxpayers of Yonkers first. We have to trim spending. During the holiday season we were given a grim reminder of the difficult economic times when employees were laid off or demoted. The Council slashed \$400,000 from our small budget to help save city workers. We expect to receive a tough budget from the Mayor that controls spending while holding the line on property tax increases.

The City Council will continue to support economic development projects that bring more revenue and jobs to our city. We will have the Inspector General review the projects that were approved such as Hope VI and Ridge Hill to make sure developers are delivering on the agreements that they promised.

All across the country we see increased calls for oversight as government is being asked to bail out industries. After audits by the State Comptrollers which found lax reporting by the Yonkers Industrial Development Agency, we are looking closely at the IDA and have demanded Council inclusion on the board which currently is comprised of only the Mayor and his appointees.

The City Council will soon address the next phase of the SFC project for downtown - the Land Disposition Agreement or LDA. Our due diligence has allowed the project to move forward even in these dire economic times. While some flexibility is required, we will ensure that the final agreement includes real jobs, affordable housing, environmental sensitivity and minimum development commitments that continue the transformation of downtown Yonkers.

I ask all residents to help Yonkers by shopping locally in our stores, using the services of the small businesses located here and frequenting our many wonderful restaurants downtown and throughout the City who need our help now, before the development is complete. The city must support these enterprises with economic development loans and interest subsidies to tide them over until better times. The Council will take the necessary actions to make this a reality.

The key to our city weathering this terrible economic storm is cooperation:

Cooperation between all branches of government. Cooperation between the City and the private sector. Cooperation between the City and its employees and its residents. Effective cooperation requires open and honest communication that is transparent. Nowhere will that cooperation be more important than in our upcoming budget deliberations.

We must also, even in these difficult economic times, invest in our future by improving our environment in a way that actually saves the City money. The Council is poised to adopt LEED and Energy Star standards for new construction within Yonkers. With the help of the Green Policy Task Force, we have proposed smart growth initiatives by leveraging state and federal green funding but there is more out there that we may be missing. To this end, the Council has consistently funded a Director of Sustainable Growth and Development who has yet to be hired by the Administration. Even in a budget crisis, it makes no sense to cut positions that save money or bring in revenue.

A sound budget will place priority on direct services such as cops walking the beat and teachers in the classroom above administrative overhead.

Clearly, we are facing serious challenges as we move forward.

The upcoming budget will not be easy and we must face reality even if it is painful. We are confident that the people of Yonkers will get through these difficult times. We have the best municipal workers who have shown time after time that they are up to any challenge.

Moving Yonkers forward, together, we can and must do better.

Thank you and good night.

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